Teaching Students to Self-Edit

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of decades, the process approach to teaching writing has greatly improved both L1 and L2 composition pedagogy. However, though students may be much better at invention, organization, and revision than they were before, too many written products are still riddled with grammatical and lexical inaccuracies. No matter how interesting or original a student's ideas are, an excess of sentence- and discourse-level errors may distract and frustrate instructors and other readers. Because this may lead to harsh evaluation of the student's overall writing abilities, ESL writing teachers, in addition to focusing on students' ideas, need to help students develop and improve their editing skills.

In the modern process approach composition classroom, editing refers to finding and correcting grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors before submitting (or "publishing") a final written product. A number of studies claim that a lack of grammatical accuracy in ESL student writing may impede students' progress in the university at large (Janopolous, 1992; Santos, 1988; Vann, Lorenz, & Meyer, 1991; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984). As a university-level ESL writing teacher, I know the high standard of accuracy in student writing that the academic discourse community demands. My students will not succeed outside of the sheltered world of the ESL class unless they can learn to reduce their errors. Because I will not always be there to help my students, it is important that they learn to edit their own work.

As shown by several ESL editing textbooks (Ascher, 1993; Fox, 1992; Lane & Lange, 1993; Raimes, 1992a) and a teacher's reference on responding to ESL writing (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993), researchers and teachers of ESL writing have become more aware of the need to help students self-edit their writing (Lane & Lange, 1993, p. xix). In response to this need, I have developed and used a semester-long editing process approach to help advanced ESL writing students become more self-sufficient as editors. The particulars of this approach follow.

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

I based my editing process approach on the following principles:

- Students and teachers should focus on major patterns of error rather than attempt to correct every single error (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993).
- Because not all students will make the same errors, it is necessary and desirable to personalize editing instruction as much as possible.
- The errors to focus on should be those that are most frequent, global (interfere with the comprehensibility of the text), and stigmatizing (would cause a negative evaluation from native speakers) (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Hendrickson, 1980).

THE EDITING PROCESS

Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993) and Hendrickson (1980) advocate teaching students a discovery approach through which they will become independent self-editors. I teach my advanced ESL students through a three-stage discovery approach to become self-sufficient editors.

STAGE 1: FOCUSING ON FORM

Although some teachers assume that all ESL students are obsessively concerned with grammar to the detriment of developing and presenting their ideas, I have found that many students have little interest in and pay limited attention to editing their work. They find editing tedious or unimportant or they have become overly dependent on teachers or tutors to correct their work for them. A crucial step in teaching students to become good editors is to convince them of the necessity of doing so.

To raise awareness of the importance of editing, I use in-class activities in which the students look at sentences or short student essays that contain a variety of editing problems. Rather than simply finding and correcting errors, they discuss how these errors impede their understanding of the texts, as in the following three examples:

1. My *parent* always gave me a lot of love.
2. School is the place where I *learn* things such as reading and writing.
3. I like coffee; *on the other hand*, I also like tea.

The italicized portions of these three sentences contain common ESL writing errors: respectively, an omitted plural marker, a verb tense error, and a misused transitional phrase. However, none of the sentences immediately appears ungrammatical – *parent* can be singular; the two verbs in Example 2 are both in present tense and thus appear consistent; and *on the other hand* does signal a clause expressing a different viewpoint from the one preceding it. But once the students look closely at the texts, they can see that the use of *parent* is confusing and nonidiomatic (if you really had only one parent, you would identify him or her as your father or mother), that they learned to read and write a long time ago in school, and that liking coffee is not the opposite of liking tea, as implied by the use of *on the other hand.* Even fairly minor errors can lead to problems in text processing and comprehension.

Another strategy I use to convince the students of the necessity of developing editing skills is to give them a diagnostic essay assignment and then provide them with written feedback about their ideas, detailed information about their editing problems, and an indication of what grade they would receive if still writing at this level at the end of the semester. Giving students an immediate sense of what their final grade could be is motivating, but

does not seem to be intimidating if it is made clear that these initial grades are for the students' information only and will not be counted in their final course evaluation.

STAGE 2: RECOGNIZING MAJOR ERROR TYPES

Research indicates that focusing on patterns of error, rather than on individual errors, is most effective for both teachers and students, so at this stage I train students to recognize various types of errors. The categories may vary depending on the students' needs, but they should be selected from error types which are frequent, global, and stigmatizing. I sensitize students to these error patterns by going over the targeted categories, letting them practice identifying them in sample student essays, and then looking for these errors in peer-editing exercises (see Activities 1 and 2). It seems to be true that it is easier to find mistakes in others' work than in one's own. Exercises in recognizing error patterns of other writers' work help students become more aware of similar problems in their own writing. They also help lead students away from the frustrating and even counterproductive notion that they can or should attempt to correct every single error in a given essay draft.

During this stage of the editing process, I may also give brief, focused instruction on major patterns of error if there are particular errors to which most students are prone. For instance, students may be confused about when to use the simple past tense and when to use the present perfect. In-class instruction should deal directly with this difficulty, rather than attempting to give students a complete overview of the English verb tense system or even of the various uses of the present perfect. (See Activity 3, which provides an example of an overview of noun error problems: This activity takes 15–20 minutes.)

Activity 1
Editing: Major Error Categories

Type 1: Nouns
- *Noun endings*
  I need to buy some *book.*
  I gained a lot of *knowledges* in high school.
- *Articles*
  I need to buy ∧ *book.*
  A good *jobs* is hard to find.

Type 2: Verbs
- *Subject-verb agreement*
  The boys *was* hungry.
  That TV show *come* on at 8:00.
  Many students in the class *is* failing.
- *Verb tense*
  Last year I *come* to Sac State.
  I've never been to Disney World, but I *had been* to Disneyland before.
- *Verb form*
  My car *was stole*.
  My mother *is miss* her children.

Type 3: Punctuation and Sentence Structure
- *Sentence fragments*
  Wrong: *After I got home.* I washed the dishes.
  Right: After I got home, I washed the dishes.

- *Comma errors*
  When I got home ∧ I discovered my house was on fire.
  I studied hard for the test ∧ but I still got a bad grade.
  I studied hard for the test, I still got a bad grade.
- *Run-on sentences*
  I studied hard for the test I still got a bad grade.
- *Semicolon errors*
  Although I studied hard for the test; I still got a bad grade.
  I studied hard for the test ∧ I still got a bad grade.

Type 4: Word Form Errors
Examples:
My father is very *generosity.*
Intelligent is *importance* for academic success.

Type 5: Preposition Errors
Examples:
I do a lot of work *on* volunteer organizations.
For an American, I like baseball and hot dogs.

Editing Worksheet

Instructions: Read the sample essay. First, find all the nouns, and underline any noun
errors. Then do the same with verbs, punctuation/sentence structure. word forms,
and prepositions. Count the errors of each type and fill in the worksheet below. Turn
in both your marked essay and this worksheet.

Type 1: Noun Errors
Total number of noun errors in essay: _____
Write one example from the essay. Underline the error.

Type 2: Verb Errors
Total number of verb errors in essay: _____
Write one example from the essay. Underline the error.

Type 3: Punctuation and Sentence Structure
Total number of punctuation errors in essay: _____
Write one example from the essay. Underline the error.

Type 4: Word Forms
Total number of word-form errors in essay: _____
Write one example from the essay. Underline the error.

Type 5: Prepositions
Total number of preposition errors in essay: _____
Write one example from the essay. Underline the error.

Note: The categories for this activity were taken from Fox, 1992.

An alternative to whole-class instruction is to individualize editing instruction with an
editing handbook (e.g., Ascher, 1993; Fox, 1992; Lane & Lange, 1993; Raimes, 1992b). A
handbook is distinct from an ESL text, which attempts to provide comprehensive coverage
of grammatical concepts, as opposed to focusing on specific writing problems students may
have. In addition, many ESL writing textbooks include an editing section (e.g., Raimes,

1992a; Spack, 1990). When using an editing handbook, I give students homework assignments that correspond to their particular area(s) of need as shown in their essay drafts.

Activity 2
Peer-/Self-Editing Workshop

Your Name: _____

Writer's Name: _____
 Instructions: Read your partner's second essay, looking specifically for errors in
 grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Mark the paper using the following symbols:

- If there is a spelling error, circle it.
- If there is a grammar error, underline the word or phrase that has the problem.
- If there is a missing word, put a ∧ to show that something is missing.

   After you have read and marked the essay, complete the worksheet below.

Error Types

Type 1 (Noun Errors)
Total number found in essay: _____
Example (from essay): _____

Type 2 (Verb Errors)
Total number found in essay: _____
Example (from essay): _____

Type 3 (Punctuation and Sentence Structure Errors)
Total number found in essay: _____
Example (from essay): _____

Type 4 (Word Form Errors)
Total number found in essay: _____
Example (from essay): _____

Type 5 (Preposition errors)
Total number found in essay: _____
Example (from essay): _____

STAGE 3: SELF-EDITING PRACTICE

In the final phase, I require students to find and correct errors in their own and other students'
essay drafts (see Activity 2). Also, throughout the semester, students keep a log of their error
frequencies in the different categories so they can observe their progress. As the semester
progresses and the students get more and more editing practice, I gradually decrease the
amount of editing feedback I provide and turn the editing task over first to peer editors and
then to the writers themselves.

Activity 3

Grammar Focus: Nouns

 I. Definitions: A noun is a word that names a person, place, object, idea, emotion, or quantity.

Nouns may be concret: physical, can be touched, seen, felt, etc. (book, table, gas).

Nouns may be abstract: nonphysical (friendship, sadness, hope).

Both concrete and abstract nouns can be classified into two types:
- count nouns: may be counted (apples, students, chairs)
- noncount nouns: are not counted (money, coffee, happiness)

II. Noun trouble spots for ESL writers

A. Plural nouns must have plural markers:

1. English teachers are good spellers.

2. One of the ways to improve your spelling is to study hard.

B. Subject nouns must agree in number with their verbs.

1. *One* of the reasons I came here *is* to study English.

2. *People* who emigrate to the United States *are* usually very happy.

3. English *teachers are* good spellers.

C. *Singular count nouns must* be preceded by a determiner (*a/an*, *the*, *some*, *my*, *this*, *that*, *one*, etc.).

1. I have *a friend*.

2. My friend owns *a car*.

3. *The car* is old.

4. She bought *her car a long time ago*.

5. *Some people* think she should get *a new car*.

6. *These people* have more money than she does.

Exercises: Find and Correct the Noun Errors.

1. One of the way teacher helps her students is to talk to them outside of class.

2. Teacher in general are very hardworking.

3. This is the reason that many people don't want to become teacher.

4. Each of the students is important to a good teacher.

5. Student should come to class every day and always do homework.

6. Students should treat their teacher with respect at all time.

7. Student who come to United States have to learn English.

8. Students is very nervous.

9. A teacher who gives a lot of high grade is good teacher.

10. All of student should give presents to their teacher at the end of the semester.

Does This Editing Approach Work?

I have developed the various components of this approach over several years. In order to assess its effectiveness, I undertook two small research projects (Ferris, 1994). The first showed that nearly all students analyzed (twenty-eight to thirty) made significant progress in reducing their percentages of errors in five error categories over the course of a semester.

However, their degree of improvement varied across error types, essay topics, and writing context (in or out of class). As a result, I modified my instructional approach to editing during the following semester to allow for a more individualized treatment of student editing problems. Specifically, I gave the students individual editing assignments from a text (Fox, 1992) when each essay draft was returned, rather than providing in-class grammar-focus presentations. Research on the effects of this change is ongoing, but preliminary results indicate that student improvement was even greater than with the prior approach.

Editing is an aspect of the writing process which has been somewhat neglected by ESL writing teachers and researchers. With the introduction of new techniques and tools (such as editing handbooks) to help students edit better (and research and teacher-training books to support these efforts), working on students' sentence-level needs is likely to become a more successful and satisfying enterprise than it has been. Although we should not return to the excesses of previous generations (attempting to mark and eradicate every single error student writers make), our goal should be to have our students become skillful independent editors who can function beyond the ESL writing class.

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